

www.europeanproceedings.com

European Proceedings of
Social and Behavioural Sciences
EpSBS

e-ISSN: 2357-1330

DOI: 10.15405/epsbs.2020.10.02.69

ICH 2019

International Conference on Humanities

AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS IN METAPHYSICAL POETRY

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Abstract

Metaphysical poetry generally refers to the works of a relatively small group of seventeenth century English poets. They are uniquely different in comparison to other types of poetry as they were written in a specific style, peculiar to the nature of metaphysics. Although there are different kinds of characteristics defining the essence of metaphysical poetry, this study focuses on four prominent ones namely; intellectuality, imageries and conceits, expression of ideas and feelings, and the development of logical arguments. This study explores the selected characteristics in terms of how they are connected with each other in two metaphysical poems, John Donne's *The Good-Morrow* and Andrew Marvell's *The Definition of Love*. From the discussion, it is evident that all four characteristics under study are served throughout the two poems. The analysis shows that the poets use their intellectual abilities to construct elaborated metaphysical imageries and conceits, which they then use as a platform to convey their ideas and feelings. The ideas and feeling are reasoned through logical arguments, which requires high degree of intellectual abilities not only to construct but also to comprehend them. Such connection between the characteristics serve to support the essence and uniqueness of what is known as metaphysical poetry.

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Keywords: Metaphysical poetry, metaphysical poets, John Donne, Andrew Marvell.



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1. Introduction

It is generally recognized that the term metaphysical is used to describe a group of seventeenth-century English poets, who wrote in a certain manner under the influence of, or in reaction to, the work of John Donne (Burrow, 2006). The selected few associated as such are known as the metaphysical poets, and their works branded as metaphysical poetry. Exactly what the term metaphysical means within this context requires some clarification. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), the adjective *metaphysical* relates to “the part of philosophy that is about understanding existence and knowledge”; while *philosophy* on the other hand, is “the use of reason in understanding such things as the nature of the real world and existence [...]”. Thus, by implication, the term metaphysical poetry suggest the kind of poetry engaging in particular matters and the nature of reality, by means of reasoning. Conversely, as pointed out by Burrow (2006), the Oxford English Dictionary better defines the term as, “[...] Adopted by Johnson as the designation of certain 17th cent. poets (chief of whom were Donne and Cowley) addicted to “witty conceits” and far-fetched imagery (p. 1). In more recent use, of poetry which expresses emotion within an intellectual context [...]”. While some consider such definitions as befitting to describe the Metaphysicals, others claimed that the term actually creates an inaccurate portrayal of the poets and their poetry. Bennett (1971) for instance stated that the term metaphysical “gives the impression that metaphysical poetry discusses the nature of the universe”, she continues that “Donne and the poets most influenced by him were not speculating the nature of things [...] when Donne writes, he is expressing a state of mind by referring to a background of ideas” (pp. 1-2). Principally, this means that instead of portraying the nature of things per se in his poems, Donne actually utilizes it (i.e. the nature of things) as a reference to convey his thoughts. In this sense, Donne and his followers were not exactly in tune with the meaning of the term metaphysical as mentioned earlier. Thus, the term is arguably considered (by some) as being somewhat carelessly attached to the particular group of poets and their poetry. As Eliot (2010) puts it, “the phrase has long done duty as a term of abuse, or as the label of a quaint and pleasant taste” (p. 95). Nevertheless, by arguing on the accurateness of the term, critics were not in any way trying to deny the Metaphysicals. Instead, they were merely pointing out some arguments regarding the term, which most scholars often took for granted (Correll, 2018). Indeed, there are certain qualities peculiar to the Metaphysicals and their poetry. This current study analyses four defining characteristics principal to metaphysical poetry, which sets them apart from other types of poetry.

2. Problem Statement

In general, it is not practical to come up with a finite list of characteristics, by which all metaphysical poetry must have in order to qualify as one. A broad justification for this is the fact that they were written by different individuals with different views and personalities. In this sense, some works contain more ‘metaphysical’ characteristics in comparison to others, i.e. the degree to which certain characteristics appear in each work varies. Although it is not a clear cut matter, there are several fundamental characteristics which are prominent to metaphysical poetry, and four of which are of interest in this current study.

3. Research Questions

How does the characteristics of; (i) intellectuality, (ii) imageries and conceits, (iii) expression of ideas and feelings, and (iv) development of logical arguments, operates to serve as the foundation of metaphysical poetry.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to analyse and discuss four principal characteristics of metaphysical poetry namely; intellectuality, imageries and conceits, expression of ideas and feelings, and development of logical arguments. All four characteristics are analysed in terms of how they connect and work together to support the foundation of what is known as metaphysical poetry.

5. Research Methods

The four characteristics are interrelated in metaphysical poetry through the poet's intellectual abilities to construct metaphysical imageries and conceits, which are then used to convey their ideas and feelings, which are reasoned through logical arguments (of which requires high degree of intellectual abilities to begin with). Perhaps it is better to illustrate this idea with a diagram as shown below (see figure 01).

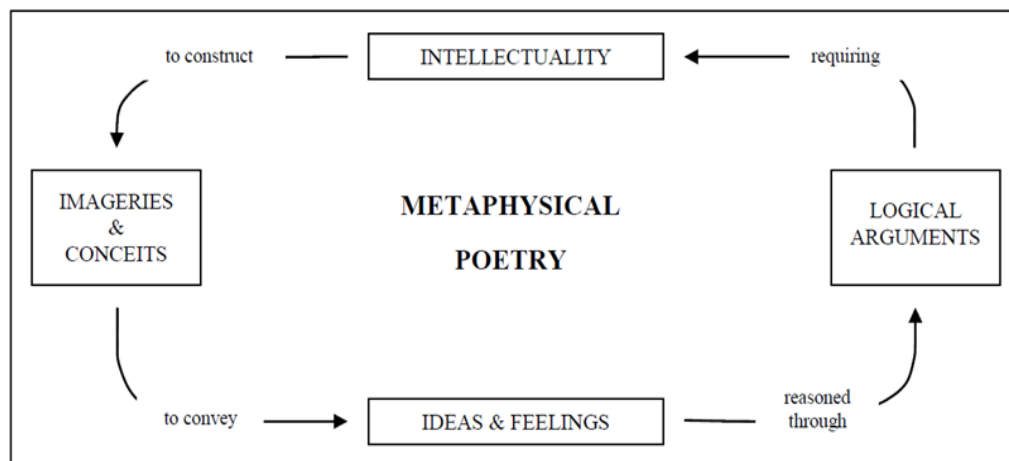


Figure 01. Connection between the four characteristics in metaphysical poetry under study

The diagram represents an overview of how the characteristics are connected to each other. However, this is by no means asserting that all metaphysical poetry must comply with the exact step-by-step order. Nevertheless, the diagram and the idea above provides a practical framework for this current study to conduct its analysis. Correll (2018) aptly stated, “[...] Donne audaciously yoking erotic passion with intellectual virtuosity as the originator, Marvell audaciously yoking (some version of) erotic passion with intellectual virtuosity as the last of the metaphysicals” (p. 317). Thus, what better way to discuss the four characteristics in hand, through the works of the earliest metaphysical poet, John Donne, and the last of their race, Andrew Marvell. “These are two poets whose lyric poems are remarkable, original and

complex, often difficult, and certainly provocative in their approach to amatory discourse” (Correll, 2018, p. 314). Taking this point into consideration, the source of analysis for this study comes from their love theme poems namely *The Good-Morrow* and *The Definition of Love*.

6. Findings

The findings are presented in two sections; the first section discusses Donne’s *The Good-Morrow*, followed by Marvell’s *The Definition of Love* in the subsequent section.

6.1. The Good-Morrow (Donne, 1633)

Donne’s poem *The Good-Morrow* is about embracing and celebrating new found love. It is an excellent example of a poem displaying varieties of imagery drawn from many different sources. The sources that generate these imageries are of intellectual nature, therefore these imageries require intellectual abilities to create and to comprehend them. By dividing the poem into three stanzas, Donne is able to present his arguments in a gradual logical manner, building the arguments as the poem progresses. The first stanza begins with the poet raising a series of rhetorical questions functioning as a reminiscence of his previous life and love. The state before he falls in love with her (his new lover), which is ‘the past’;

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
 Did, till we loved? Were we not wean'd till then?
 But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?
 Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers den?
 'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be;
 If ever any beauty I did see,
 Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

The metaphysical imagery in this poem begins with an image that suggests ordinariness, mundane activities of a child breast feeding (“But suck’d on country pleasures, childishly?”), to the act of sleeping (“Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers den?”). Simply taken, before both lovers meet, they were ignorant (as a ‘child’) and they were neglected (while ‘sleeping’) of the true meaning of love, they had never experience true love, not until they found each other. Although it may seem rather simple, the imagery of the “Seven Sleepers” actually connotes a legend, i.e. the legend of seven young man of Ephesus who fell into a miraculous sleep while taking refuge in a cave (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). In order to really understand this imagery, readers must have the knowledge of the legend. Donne, who obviously has this knowledge, utilizes his intellect to create such imagery, which in return magnifies the sense of ‘the past’ that is being depicted here in this first stanza. This is one of the many examples of how metaphysical poets use their intellectual abilities to express their thoughts and feelings. The ending of this stanza connotes the idea that all his previous love experience, everything before her, meant nothing (“Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee”), it was merely a ‘dream’, in comparison to his love for her now. The word ‘dream’ complements the earlier imagery of ‘sleep’, enhancing the idea of insignificant and of the past.

In contrast to the first stanza, the poem now focuses on ‘the present’ in the second stanza. Before, both lover were depicted as being asleep in the past, but now they are awoken in the present;

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room, an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown;
Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

In this stanza, the emphasis is on the feeling of love that both lovers share. Now ‘awaken’ and together, they are ready to embrace and celebrate their new found love for each other. According to Bennett (1971), the metaphysical poets choose to use words that are of “large draughts of intellectual day imbibed from science rather than from poetry” (p. 5). This means that the words and imageries that they prefer to use, evokes the current intellectual issues and happenings of their time, such as new achievements and discoveries. This quality is evident here in this stanza (and in others yet to discuss). Clearly, the images in the last three lines are based on geographical features. Donne utilizes his intellectual abilities to create such geographic imageries, and through these imageries expresses the lover’s state of mind and emotion towards his lover. His emotions towards her are compared with the exploration of sea-discoverers. It does not matter if the sea-discoverers have discovered a new land or even a new world (“Let sea-discoverers to new world have gone”, “Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown”), his journey and his discovery of her and of her love surpasses them all. Beer (1972) commented, “in *The Good-Morrow* the sea-discoverers, with all their topical glamour and novelty, are introduced only to be dismissed as lacking in true exploration compared with the relationship he is describing” (p. 50). This is exactly the nature of metaphysical poets such as Donne. They use their intellectual abilities to create and present extravagant imageries, which in return express more extravagant ideas and arguments, as seen with this geographical imageries.

In addition, these imageries simultaneously create a sense of ‘the present’, as voyage and exploration was the current happenings of the time, maintaining the sequence of arguments in the aspect of ‘the past’, ‘the present’ and later ‘the future’. The source of imagery has now shifted from the mundane everyday activities, to a more exciting world of explorers and geographical elements. These imageries function in multiple dimensions rather than serving a single purpose. Creating these sort of imageries definitely require high intellectual abilities. Again, this is how metaphysical poets relate their elaborated imageries to convey their ideas and feelings.

The final stanza represents ‘the future’ of their love. At this point, both lovers are genuinely in love with each other as it is depicted in the first line, “My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears”, meaning that if either one of them look into each other’s eye, the only image that is reflected would be of their own. Hence, both lovers are depicted as being deeply in love with each other. The past (as described in the first stanza) is no longer an issue and from here on, they only need to embrace and celebrate their love and their future together;

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,
Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west?

Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally;
 If our two loves be one, or thou and I
 Love so alike that none doe slacken, none can die.

In this stanza, Donne continues to develop geographical imageries by portraying the lovers as two half of the hemispheres. Now that they are together, they complete each other just as two hemispheres would complete a sphere or the world. This manner of constantly presenting and relating logical arguments through imageries, enhances the complexity of metaphysical poetry. In her writing, Bennett (1971) stated that “the purpose of an image in Donne’s poetry is to define the emotional experience by an intellectual parallel” (p. 31). This view has been perceived to be true in the previous stanzas. In the last three lines of this final stanza, the intellectual parallel is of scientific nature. Obviously, Donne is not contemplating about the science of mixing dye in the line “Whatever dyes, was not mix’d equally”. The argument is, if the ingredients mixed together were equal to each other, it could never be dissolved. Just like them, since their love for each other is equally strong, it could never be dissolved, hence their love for each other is eternal. Donne uses the scientific nature of dye compounding, as a vehicle to express this sense of eternal love between two lovers. Once again, Donne manages to convey his emotions through elaborated imagery, which definitely requires high intellectual abilities to be created and comprehend. In addition, this final imagery is also seen as Donne’s philosophical notion, or as Alvarez (1961: 26) puts it, “at the end of *The Good-Morrow*, Donne produced his own standards of wit. Instead of serving philosophy, he used it”. With that, Donne cleverly shifted the imagery from an ordinary mundane scenario, to a geographical scene and finally ends it with a scientific or even of a philosophical nature. The intensity and the complexity of imageries developed side by side with the arguments of the poem in this logical manner.

6.2. The Definition of Love (Marvell, 1681)

Although Marvell’s *The Definition of Love* is a poem of love, it is however not of one that celebrates love. This poem practically grief over the impossibility of two lovers to be together. The arguments are built in a logical sequence. However, they do not exactly intensifies as the poem progresses like that of *The Good-Morrow*. Rather, they are a sequence of arguments with relatively equal weight, accumulating to serve the conclusion of the poem. The poem begins with the poet confessing his love for her is exceptional and rare, but he is in misery and despair because it is impossible to obtain her;

My Love is of a birth as rare
 As `tis for object strange and high:
 It was begotten by despair
 Upon Impossibility.

After this first stanza, the poem proceeds to reason out the arguments of why it is impossible for the two lovers to be together. This is where Marvell brilliantly exploits his intellectual abilities to create magnificent metaphysical imageries for this poem. Much of Marvell’s ideas and feelings were expressed through his complex imageries and conceits, drawing from many different intellectual resources as the last four stanzas of this poem wonderfully demonstrates.

In the last four stanzas, Marvell employs a combination of geographic, scientific and geometric imageries to convey the reasons and feelings of the lovers. It begins with geographical and geometrical images;

And therefore her Decrees of Steel
Us as the distant Poles have plac'd,
(Though Loves whole World on us doth wheel)
Not by themselves to be embrac'd.

Here, both lovers are depicted as being on the opposite ends of the earth poles and also as being on the opposite ends of a wheel. The earth or the wheel may spin in any way, yet they will always be on the opposite end of each other. This is exactly how Marvell relates the geometrical logic that two opposite ends of a spinning object will never meet, with the idea of two lovers being apart, impossible to meet each other. This metaphysical conceit provides an extended comparison, used as a means of exploring the experience it conveys. However, there is still hope for them in the next stanza;

Unless the giddy Heaven fall,
And Earth some new Convulsion tear;
And, us to joyn, the World should all
Be cramp'd into a Planisphere.

The argument here is, the only way to be united requires a total collapse of the world, so that both poles could meet only when the world is flattened. However, if the world is crushed, surely both lovers would be destroyed as well. Marvell cleverly combines the geographic and the geometric imagery to create this paradoxical situation. This paradoxical idea helps to intensify the difficulty and the impossibility of both lovers being together. In this sense, not only are they constrained by the physical elements, they are also overpowered by natural elements such as fate and death which they do not have control over. Marvell creates intellectual imageries to present ideas and arguments operating on multiple levels as such. This is one of the many qualities that distinguish metaphysical poems from other kinds of poems. It demands and challenges the intellect of its readers. Their difficulty to be together however, does not stop there;

As Lines so Loves oblique may well
Themselves in every Angle greet:
But ours so truly Parallel,
Though infinite can never meet.

Apparently, even if they manage to survive the crush, it is still impossible to be together because now that the world is flat, they would be moving in a parallel never ending condition, still unable to meet each other. According to Bennett (1971), "the metaphysical poets preferred to use words which call the mind into play, rather than those that appeal to the senses or evoke an emotional response through memory" (p. 5). Words such as "oblique" and "parallel" in this stanza more often relates to the knowledge of geometry rather than to a memory. Therefore, it compels readers to think in geometrical logic in order to comprehend the message. This quality of calling the mind into play is also apparent in the previous stanzas. The arguments are built in logical sequence. First by pointing out the problem (could never meet since both

is at the opposite ends), then suggesting solutions for the problem (to meet at the middle, but suffers the possibility of being crushed), and finally realizing that there is no solution to the problem (back to the point that they could never meet each other). This is typical of metaphysical poets, to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their ideas, stirring the minds of their readers along the way.

The final stanza begins with “Therefore” as a sense of conclusion to all the previous arguments. It also signifies the end of the logical sequence;

Therefore the Love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debarrs,
Is the Conjunction of the Mind,
And Opposition of the Stars.

The imageries in this final stanza calls upon the knowledge of astronomy whereby, “Conjunction refers to the state of being in apparent union of heavenly bodies, while Opposition means the situation of two heavenly bodies when their longitudes differ by 180 degree” (Dalglish, 1961, p. 175). In essence, this stanza implies that despite all the difficulties and impossibilities portrayed in previous stanzas, their love for each other will last forever because their sole and spirit are in union like that of the heavenly bodies. Creating such elaborate imageries (not only in this stanza but also as in previous others), once again proves that metaphysical poets such as Marvell are highly intellectual individuals. As seen in this poem, the willingness to illustrate the difficulty of two lovers being together, with reference to scientific and geometric concepts, makes the metaphysical imageries unique and wonderful. Dalglish (1961) stated that, “a very important aspect of metaphysical imagery is that it is used, not as mere ornament or illustration, but as a means of communicating thoughts and of exploring experience” (p. 5). Clearly the imageries and the conceits in this poem were not meant to merely beautify the poem. When Marvell compares the lovers as the opposite poles of the earth, or when they were depicted as two heavenly souls forever in love, he is not simply decorating the poem with illustrations of amazing scenes. Marvell utilizes these complex imageries to express and convey his thoughts and emotional experiences.

7. Conclusion

This study analysed four selected characteristics of metaphysical poetry by means of two love theme poems, *The Good-Morrow* and *The Definition of Love*, both celebrated as one of the best love poems of Donne and Marvell respectively. It is clear from the discussion that all four characteristics of intellectuality, imageries and conceits, expression of ideas and feelings, and development of logical arguments, are essentially connected to each other, supporting the core of metaphysical poetry. The imageries are of intellectual nature that requires intellectual abilities not only to create but also to comprehend. Donne first uses his intellectual abilities to create a series of elaborate metaphysical imageries. Then, with these complex imageries, he conveys and expresses the experience and emotions of love, which is presented in logical arguments of the past, present and the future. Undeniably, intellect is required to create such arguments, hence completing the cycle of characteristics under discussion. By the same token, Marvell brilliantly creates a series of elaborate metaphysical imageries drawn from many different intellectual sources. Through the imageries, he expresses his thoughts and emotions, presenting them in logical

arguments by first recognising the circumstances, then reasoning the circumstances, and finally concluding the circumstances. In the attempt to reason, Marvell constantly analysed and argued about the ideas and feelings that have been presented, which obviously involves intellectual abilities to comprehend. Clearly, all four characteristics under discussion are served throughout the poems, underlining the uniqueness of what is known as metaphysical poetry.

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